DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 312 014 JC 890 524

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TITLE The Use of Film/Television Techniques in Teaching the Craft of Acting in the Community College.
PUB DATE 11 Nov 89
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the National Conference of the Community College Humanities Association (Washington, DC, November 9-11, 1989).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Acting; Characterization; Community Colleges; *Course Content; *Film Production; *Teaching Methods; *Theater Arts; Two Year Colleges
IDENTIFIERS *Montgomery College MD

ABSTRACT

The theatre curriculum at Montgomery College in Rockville, Maryland teaches acting techniques used in film and television in order to take students into the world of performance via the media they appreciate first. While a large number of students do not attend the theatre and have learned little about the cultural heritage of the theatre in their elementary-secondary education, most spend some of their leisure time watching television. Since 1976, the college has offered a class entitled "Acting for Film and Television." The Department of Speech, Dance, and Theatre, and the Department of Visual Communication Technologies have included the course in their respective curricula. The course attempts to develop students' sense of craft, teaching them to free the acting instrument and liberate the imagination; develop skills in listening; learn how to deal with the script; and not worry about having to be good. Good acting begins with the skill of listening, not only to the words being spoken but to the subtext. For film actors, listening is even more critical than speaking, because the camera will search out the listener in order to explicate the story the actor is involved in with his/her partner. Film differs from the stage in that it relies less on long periods of rehearsal and more on spontaneity. Once a scene is committed to film, it will never be repeated again, while in the theatre, scenes are repeated nightly for several days or weeks. Film scripts provide far less information than plays, requiring the actor to bring to them all of his/her imagination. Students must learn to sense the qualities of the scene, and develop the ability to be intuitive analysts of the human condition. (AYC)

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The Use of Film/Television Techniques In Teaching the Craft of Acting in the Community College

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Delivered to the
Community College Humanities Association
Washington, D.C. November 11, 1989
for MPH

JC890524

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A student called me one night when I was in the theatre taking in the delights of a wickedly produced "A Midsummer Night's Dream". His plea for help leapt from my telephone answering machine like a prayer to an ancient god:

> Professor Bellais I've just seen The Last Emperor on my video tonight ... something in that movie ... just like touched me ... I have to act ... I must act ... it is an awesome movie ... it is my all time favorite ... Professor Bellais I'll do anything to be an actor ... anything ...(beep).

Anything. What will he sacrifice? To be an actor means sacrifice; the price is very high in cut out hearts, severed limbs, and damaged libidos. John Brite, my student, only knows about acting from shadows and electronic blips. He has rarely seen a performer on the stage; he has no intrinsic love for the language. The power of the projected image, nevertheless, has filled his heart and his head. To underestimate the power of the camera on the lives of students leads them away from an experience in learning that all acting students should have. John is drawn to the sensuous mystery of film; and not unlike the mystery of "A Midsummer Night's Dream", his fantasy is to be a shadow or a blip, or both.

We must reach the Johns and Janes of today's performance classroom. There are real reasons to consider acting training in the community college. There is no doubt in my mind that "...Theatre training is excellent schooling for life." (Hueval) What we teach is not only the art and craft of performance, but that

> Deadlines must be met, the curtain will go up at the set time and (they) learn (they) have to be ready. Whether it's a courtroom, an operating room, or a business meeting, 'It's showtime, and you do it. That's a part of a good theatre

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> experience. It doesn't matter what's going on, you have to go out and do it.' ... For anyone who wishes to accept it, course work in theatre and speech is solid preparation for dealing with many of life's situations, the sort of preparation a liberal arts is meant to be. (Ibid.)

If our students are to receive the full benefits of the training theatre gives them, film and television cannot be overlooked. Ignoring film and television and the demands it makes on the student is like shoving the student back, not unlike lambs to a slaughter, to a medium he or she views as an anachronism. In order not to be misunderstood, I want all my students to include the theatre in their cultural and professional experience. My teaching background has shown me that most will leave the collegiate theatre because they do not understand its validity, and therefore do not understand the validity of theatre itself. Their only theatrical experience is that of film and television. That is why I call it the "theatre of choice". Their theatre is no less a theatre experience than that of great performing arts centers experiencing Shakespeare or a black box living Mamet. Students choose film and television because they feel limited to it. Therefore, I propose that we take them into our world of performance via the medium they appreciate first. Can we use their immediate experience as a tool to win them into the stratosphere of the classical theatre or the ozone layer of the modern theatre.

Today I want to discuss the use of film and television techniques in teaching the craft of acting in the community college. In my discussion I will describe the use of film and television acting techniques in teaching performance in the theatre curriculum at Montgomery College in Rockville, Maryland .

Beginning in 1976 Montgomery College has offered a class entitled Acting for Film and Television. Reluctantly this course was accepted into the curriculum. Since its inception, the course has been under subscribed only in two instances. The average class size has been 17 students per semester, with 22 enrolled in some semesters. The average age of students has been 23, with 1.7 percent of the total annual enrollment returning and mature students. The course has proven to be extremely popular and the need for such training has not diminished. The

Departments of Speech, Dance, and Theatre and Visual Communication Technologies have included the course in their respective curricula. The Speech, Dance, and Theatre Department has included the course in its Associate in Arts degree program. Montgomery College mirrors the profile reported in the Final Report of the Center for the Study of Community Colleges Arts Education (1988).

Acting for Film and Television, treated as a sophomore level course, indicates the College and the departments are aware of their respective missions. The departments are in the process of refining their missions, as the college refines its own mission statement. Montgomery College is on tract with area colleges (Committee on the Future of Virginia Community Colleges, p.1, and Commission on the Future of the North Carolina Community College System, p.3). The mission of a department in providing such a course of study is founded on three major components: 1) service, 2) clientele, and 3) rationale. Using the paradigm described by Doucette, et al., (1985) we claim that the Speech, Dance, and Theatre Department's mission is to offer a service to a specific clientele that requires advanced understanding of the crafts required in performance, be they thespian or technician, that match the needs of the technology this clientele will encounter on a daily basis. The clientele are our students and they come to the community college environment under-skilled in art and craft.

My nearly twenty years of teaching theatre and media studies in a community college setting have led to several observations:

- a large number of students in all demographic divisions do not attend the theatre;
- most have no sense of the rich global tradition of the cinema, nor have a sense of the richness the motion picture has provided these past eight decades;
- the majority of students make no distinction between theatre and cinema since acting is acting.
- all students have something to say about the movies, but nearly nothing about the theatre;
- they make few distinctions between motion pictures and television, since they refer to video tape as film.
- they do not appreciate the tactile joys of film, since they never encounter it;

- not one of our students works film as a creative medium (Montgomery College deleted cinematography from its visual communications technologies catalogue about 1979);

The Annenberg School of the University of Pennsylvania researchers support much of these observations. In one study the researchers clearly show that television is the new American hearth (Living). The researchers at the Annenberg School found that seven out of ten Americans spend some of their leisure time with television. Of the top ten leisure time activities available to my students--and to all Americans--four of these are media-centered. This places media in perspective in the lives of Americans, and to students in the community college.

Television has become part of the elementary education, and television has been the most imperceptible teacher in America since 1950 (Firstenberg).

> Commercial television has disseminated information and reinforced ideas in a fashion certainly more pervasive than the video programs currently employed as classroom teaching aids. (Ibid.)

These are the remarks of Jean Firstenberg, former head of the American Film Institute. She believes the inability of the academic community to recognize the need to make "the history and function of mass media a subject for study in the curriculum of all school level..." (Ibid.) hinders the intellectual growth of students today. We need to have a fuller understanding of what are the "artistic forces (that) govern the kind of things we see on television" and on our motion picture screens (Ibid.). To say that art and literature does not exist in media is a smug response. Such an attitude keeps most students away from the aesthetic experience and renders only such an experience to the dominion of the privileged.

In the formative years of elementary, middle and senior high schools, the cultural heritage of the theatre is all but ignored. We certainly ignore the cultural heritage of the media, seeing it only as a teaching tool in our educational tradition (National Public Radio). Therefore, our students are exposed only to the notion that the ideas of commercial television, video, and film are suspect. Our students contain within them a histrionic sensibility that is all but stifled, as they

have no theatre to comprehend. The student is kept away from media as a performance tool because the prejudice against these devices as artistic implements by the exponents of fine arts who tyrannize the academy.

> Movies are not about ... horses galloping; they are about the primal desire to watch other human beings, stimulated by narrative, montage, and camera placement (Naremore, p.240).

To move performance away from a fine art is an acceptable task. Performance is not meant to be obscure and unapproachable, it is meant to illuminate the human condition; performance is to clarify and reveal. There is no definition of a fine art (Schneider, p. 17) we can all accept, and not unlike pornography we cannot describe it but we know it when we see it. Art exists in all forms of media. The medium of film can be a vehicle for fine art as well as literature, painting, and music. Today's critics have finally accepted film, but not video, and have given us an overblown language to explain the people's phenomenon (Kalter, p. 164). We cannot let either this critical language and the ubiquity of media cloud the vision of art, nor should we let this ubiquity lull us into believing that any one medium is a mere record keeper of an event. This quality of ubiquity can be used against the teaching of acting to students who have chosen either film or television or both as their theatre because movies and TV are viewed as derivative, lacking form and substance. This is probably truer for television than for film. Hollywood film remains a source of scorn, however.

All performance is showing behavior, and is a valid subject for study, and as James Naremore writes in Cinema Acting

> . . .words like "drama", "performance", and "acting" can designate a great variety of behavior, only some of which is theatrical in the purest sense. But given the affinity between theatre and the world, how do we know this purity? How do we determine the importance and obvious difference between performers in everyday life and performers who are behaving theatrically? The answer is not altogether clear, even though we often make such distinctions, and even though the basis on which we make them is crucial to the study of acting as an art or as a vehicle for ideology (Naremore, p. 22).

Naremore cites Goffman for the solutions (Frame Analysis, p.124) when he writes that theatrical performance is "an arrangement which transforms an individual into. . .an object that can be looked at in the round and without offense, and looked to for engaging behavior by persons in an audience role". Sam Waterston, the lead actor in "The Killing Fields" and the blind rabbi in "Crimes and Misdemeanors", calls this "ostentation" of the actor "visibility" (Kalter, p. 156, Naremore, p. 22). I call it "heightened conversation" or "heightened reality". Schneider and Naremore look toward the ego as the source of performance. Naremore refers to the performer as "showing off" (Naremore, p. 23). The actor on the screen shows what we must know. The actor becomes an agent for the narrative (Ibid.) by validating the story through his or her validation of the character.

My interest is not to create a battlefield between theatre and media, but to bring the two into the lives of students. A struggling British actor one day complained to a colleague of mine that the trouble with American actors is that they are all trained for the cinema. His mistaken belief stems from the mannerism of British actors and literary tradition of their stage. Our stage is motivated and built on the concept of action. That is why film appears to be such a natural medium to the American student. Perhaps this grossly overstates the condition, but my experience supports this.

> You can't really talk about acting because acting is a person. There is no such thing, maybe, as acting; there are only actors, and they all devise techniques that they hope will make it easier for them to get God's gift out. Sometimes their techniques work against them and sometimes they work for them; but they're God-given gifts nonetheless (Kalter, p. 156).

My student, John Brite, who calls me aglow, leaving impassioned messages on my answering machine, has chosen to make film (more honestly home video) his theatre of choice. This is the truth of our time. To state otherwise is to ignore a grim reality--or a happy one, depending on your viewpoint. I could say to John, "Such a waste, young man, put all your energy into the true art--the fine art of theatre. Film acting is not acting!" If I were to tell John

that his aspiration is not a valid one, I would lose him. John made his stage debut this past October (1989). I suspect John Brite will find a niche in both media. If not, at least become a more self-contained human being because of the attempt.

What we need to do is create a sense of craft. I believe that the student should learn his or her craft first. We would never allow a carpenter to build a house, or construct fine furniture, without demanding an apprenticeship of preparation. However, we almost always encourage actors to do just that. They go out into the world of film and theatre without a foundation. A sense of craft can only be developed in the classroom setting. I have never been taken in by the adage that the best teacher for the actor is go out there and do it. That is romantic and mythologic. We can develop a sense of craft through an understanding of cinema performance, as film acting is very demanding in its requirements of matching, disappearing scenic reality, and the limitations of frame and focus. Sam Waterston was asked, "Do American actors need to know about their craft, do they need to have an understanding of their history, of their literature in intellectual terms?" He responded by saying:

> ...Acting is a function ... and the risk that you run by just going out into the world and getting jobs without any training is that you don't have any foundation. Someday, inspiration is bound to fail you, and then so will your body and your voice and your technique for approaching a part. You have to acquire those skills solidly and a drama school sounds like a good place to do it (Kalter, p. 147).

Waterston does see the problem of going to a drama school, because a college atmosphere can create an intellectual approach to the craft, which hinders honesty and simplicity. College can give the student an "absolutely specious and completely invalid way of looking at a given subject" (Ibid.). He believes that the arrogant attitude of the cerebral student and teacher is just as "bankrupt" as the lack of actor training (Ibid.).

To give our actors a foundation that is not cerebral I have turned to the demands of film performance. Frankly, I prefer the word movie acting to cinema or motion pictures or film. These are pretentious words and give the impression that an intellectual event is about to occur.

I want actors to work only from their script and in time--moment to moment--as it were. To keep our actors in the reality of the story and the set, I have returned to the most fundamental of acting concepts and that is the skill of listening in terms of the imagined circumstance. Tony Barr, founder of the Screen Actors' Workshop of North Hollywood, has defined acting with a marvelous run-on sentence I require my students to chisel in stone. Let me repeat it for you here:

> Acting is responding to stimuli in an imagined circumstance, in an imaginative and dynamic manner that is stylically truthful to the character and (character's) environment so as to transmit ideas and emotions to an audience (Barr, pp. 16-19).

Barr has provided us with six major concepts that develop skill in the craft of acting. Good acting must begin with the skill of listening. Here I mean, and I know Tony Barr is speaking of listening with "all your senses". Not only must the actor hear the words being spoken, but he/she must hear the subtext through touch, smell, taste, and sight. The actor must do these things for the audience, and must respond to the stimuli of the other person in the scene. To listen for lines, or cues, will not tell the actor what he/she needs to know. The actor will be an empty vessel for the scene, for the other person, for the screenwriter, for the director and ultimately for the audience.

An actor validates the character he or she is playing. Acting is not pretending, or creating a character, but responding within the context of imagined circumstance. That means, making the event of the scene true not only for the audience, but for the actor. Here I am at the touchstone of skill development. How does an actor sustain such a demand through the rigors of shooting? What does the technique of filmmaking do to the craft of acting?

On the screen listening is even more critical than speaking. Because the camera will search out the listener in order to understand the story the actor is involved in with his or her partner. In listening, the actor opens up a vulnerability that allows him or her to get to the truth of the character. This will help in dealing with the honest responses and reactions. Listening tells the actor one thing about acting--Acting is dangerous. Acting is dangerous because the performer, not the character, is listening, reacting, and feeling. Therefore, the young actor is

doing all the work; what is his or her character doing? The character does not exist without the actor; the character is not abstract, since the actor is not abstract. The viewer has to know how the actor feels towards what he or she is hearing. That is why the actor is vulnerable, not the character. If it hurts, the pain cannot be avoided; if it is wonderful, the joy must be experienced. Involvement in a scene can be dangerous for the actor because he or she is involved in truth, not pretense. Scenes cannot exist between character and character, but can only exist between actor and actor. When this occurs believability and truth occur.

Before a student begins the acting task I want them to consider these four concepts:

- free the instrument and liberate the imagination;
- develop skills in listening;
- learn how to deal with the script; and
- do not worry about having to be good.

A free instrument is in tune. Good health of body and spirit is paramount; then a willingness to get involved in the imagined moment of the story is essential to the student's success in the scene. To be involved means that the student actor must know what he or she is doing through the scene and to know how passionately success is wanted. I call that drive. Once we know our drive, I want the student to know what his or her intention is from moment to moment, and only to work in that time frame. The instrument is the actor's body and voice. That is his or her only canvas. This canvas must be clear in order to liberate the imagination. To bring to the scene those special qualities required, the actor must know how to approach the material with preconception and prejudice. Imagination requires the skill of listening; how can the actor know what is happening within the scene--within him or herself--if they are not listening with all their senses.

I believe an actor must ask four questions before the rehearsal begins, and most certainly before the shooting:

- Where have I been?

- Where am I going?
- What do I want?
- How do I feel?

The most important of these questions is "WHAT DO I WANT?" With "want" and "feel" we get a sense of involvement. What is it that causes you to want? To feel? What drives your engine and finally, how do you change? All people in a scene change to some degree; the mere encounter causes the change, be it overt or subtle. I believe that change is the only constant in drama. The actor, if not involved, cannot hear the new information that creates change. If the actor is not involved, he or she cannot see what is happening in the other person, or even him or herself. If the actor is not involved he or she does not know where he/she is geographically or emotionally in the scene--or in life for that matter. Note, too, that I say I want and I feel, I have been and I am going. I never refer to the "character", nor do I say he wants. I am the one doing the wanting, feeling, and being. This attitude creates a reality for me. And, as I approach the script, I know that a living person is in those pages. It is my responsibility to bring life to the page, regardless how sparse the information may be. In fact, the sparser the information the better it is for the actor.

An actor must know it, as Daniel Schneider maintains (p. 25). This it is an intuitive knowing. All artists must develop the ability to be intuitive "analysts" of the human condition. When the student actor approaches the film script, he or she is required to develop a sense of knowing that no other art form requires. This sense of knowing must be almost instant. The tradition of film is not to rehearse over long periods of time and that the filmic experience for the actor is one of spontaneity. Once the scene is committed to its medium it will never be repeated again. This is very different on the stage; the scene will be repeated nightly for several weeks and days.

As the student approaches the film script he or she begins to understand that this script is significantly different than the play script. The first thing noticed is that the text is "leaner" in its language. For example, in "Full Metal Jacket" a scene is described in this fashion:

> 18 EXT. MUD OBSTACLE--DAY
>
> The platoon tries to run through the mud. PYLE half carried by JOKER and COWBOY falls taking JOKER down with him.
>
> or
>
> 19 INT. BARRACKS -- PRE-DAWN
>
> HARTMAN and two Junior Drill Instructors stride into the Squad Bay. The lights go on. HARTMAN bangs loudly on an empty metal garbage can which he carries into the room. (Kubrick, et al, p. 22).

The information is sparse. The actor is required to bring to it all of his imagination. At no time does the scene writer fill in the missing detail such as how the character feels, how the moment works, what are the textures, etc. Compared to a play text, the leanness of a motion picture script causes us to think that it is devoid of literary merit.

> Screenplays cannot be read the way one might read published prose. Most of them are continuing drafts of work in progress, and not even the final, or shooting script, is final, since it is subject to further emendation by the director, the actors, and even the writer if he/she happens to be on the set. The film is the finished text, and not even the director is always guaranteed a say in those changes by the editor or the producer that determine the ultimate content and structure of the work. (Kawin, p. XVI).

Consider the actress in moments such as these from The French Lieutenant's Woman. The screenplay is by Harold Pinter, while the novel is by John Fowles. Pinter's screenplay sounds like this:

> 114. Exterior. Mrs. Poulteney's house. Night.
> The house is dark.
> A figure can be seen sitting by a dimly lit window.
>
> 115. Interior. Sarah's bedroom. Night.
> SARAH is sitting by the window. Candlelight. She is drawing.
> The camera closes in on her and reveals that she is

crying softly, as she draws.

116. The drawing.
It is a self portrait.
A sudden knock on the door. SARAH looks up.

MRS. FAIRLEY (off screen)
Miss Woodruff! Miss Woodruff! Mrs. Poulteney wishes to see you! (Pinter, p. 46-47).

What I want students to know is that it is their responsibility to see the qualities of the scene intuitively. The screen writer will not do it for them. Screenplays are not literate in the sense that they are filled with language. Screenplays are literate in their action, in their unspoken messages. Movies are meant to move. Once in a great while we will have an aberration, such as My Dinner With Andre, but students do not encounter this style of filmmaking early in their experiences, nor do they encounter such films in their film-going experience.

My objective in this paper has been to describe the use of film and television techniques in teaching the craft of acting at Montgomery College. We have not abandoned the traditional theatre in any way. Montgomery College has four sections of beginning acting, and two sections of intermediate acting at this moment. The College added Acting for Film and Television in 1976. The students that come to this course first always want more, and the more is in the traditional approach to actor training. However, film and television brings the experience close to their own aesthetic understanding. Film is not an abstract to our students; they often believe the theatre is above their needs when in fact it is the theatre they need to add depth to their lives as they approach the twenty-first century.

This is not to say that film and television have no place in the cultural life of students. Nor, is it appropriate to ask television and film to produce a better product than we ask of the printed page. We should be able to demonstrate the differences between the valuable and the indifferent in the media. Another task may be teaching students how to make the medium of film a better experience, not merely as audience but as participant. By explaining the process

from a film actor's point of view, we soon learn that the auteur propaganda denies the contribution of the actor. There is no narrative fiction film without the actor.

The omissions from this discussion are legion. I have not included the technical problems the film actor encounters. I have not included how the actor can use the technical limits of the medium to his or her advantage, nor how to use frustration to create performance. I have not included the concept of actor simplicity, nor the concept of the cover, the indirect, or direct line responses. My purpose is to share with you the positive experience film has been for the program, for the student, and for me as a student of performance. Film performance is a special type of activity that we all share. We all have a feeling about the film performer; few are neutral. To us the performer on the screen is someone we know personally. I want the student, who speaks in terms of actor names instead of character names, to begin to change that behavior and to approach film art, and literature with a new vision. I want the student to see what is on their screens, and to participate in that seeing. I have no illusions about turning my student into a movie star. But, there is that student who has gone into a film or television career with a better foundation built from the examination of this special craft. And, lastly, for the young person who has star quality, I want him or her to know Adela Rogers St. John's description of a great movie actor: "Not only must they have good looks, but on top of that they must have character" (Brownlow and Gill). They have to have character to withstand the rebuffs, the rejections, the elations, the work, the long hours, the tedium and the thrill of creating shadows and blips on a screen that will affect others as no other medium has. The movies. . .and now video. . .are a special gift of light, when used well tell us who we are. Why not participate in the telling?

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